
Blighted Property Review Committee

Thursday, January 22, 2009

Meeting Report

Committee Members Attending: L. Olsen, M. Candelario, M. Wolfe, W. Bealer

Others Attending: M. Mayfield, J. Khokhar, L. Kelleher

Mr. Olsen called the meeting to order at 6:10 p.m. He announced that a quorum was present.

Public Comment

No one offered public comment.

Agenda and Minutes

Mr. Olsen asked the Committee to review the agenda for this meeting and the minutes from the December meeting.

Mr. Candelario moved, seconded by Ms. Wolfe, to approve the agenda for this meeting and the minutes from the December meeting.

Introduction of CD Director

Ms. Kelleher explained that Mr. Mayes was unable to attend due to a death in the family. She stated that she has been speaking with Dan Wright who works in CD as the Housing Specialist about the efforts and mission of the BPRC and he is supportive. She stated that she sent Mr. Mayes an e-mail requesting that Mr. Mayes have Mr. Wright attend the BPRC meeting when he cannot.

Properties of Merit

The presentation will occur at the February meeting.

Report - Allentown Codes Shadow and Forum

Ms. Mayfield stated that she and Codes representatives spent a half day in Allentown learning about the Allentown Codes operation. She stated that staff came away with information that can assist Reading. She added that several

forms were obtained that are being formatted for use here. She stated that Reading will be adopting the Allentown ticketing system for quality of life issues, eliminating the notice prior to citation.

Ms. Mayfield reported that when they discussed developing a Codes forum with sister cities, she learned that a Codes forum already exists and Reading has now been invited into the existing forum, who is meeting next week.

Updates

Inclusion of ADD, OCR, Garden Properties, etc.

Mr. Bealer stated that this issue is on hold until after the blighted notices are issued.

Grants

Ms. Kelleher stated that she recently learned that the City is applying for \$5,000,000 in Neighborhood Stabilization Program funding. She reminded everyone of the brief prepared about this program by the Legislative Aide Committee. She explained that the City is targeting a large area, from Marion to Franklin Street and 6th St to Schuylkill Avenue. Their first focus area will be in the area abutting the Sun Fresh Food industrial area. The City, County and Our City Reading have been purchasing and demolishing properties in this area for over 10 years and this funding will help move the plan forward. She explained that a gated town-home community is planned. Ms. Wolfe questioned the rationale behind the gated community noting that this leaves one with the impression that this area must be separated from the surrounding neighborhoods. Ms. Kelleher agreed with Ms. Wolfe's opinion.

Ms. Kelleher also stated that she conversed with the DCED Southeast District Office Director Ron Bednar, who said that there are 3-5 grant programs that could assist the BPRC. He stated that the DCED has specialists that work in this areas and that he would have them contact the Council Office.

Ms. Kelleher and Mr. Khokhar also noted that when the Vacant Property Registration legislation is approved those fines/fees will also be forwarded to aid the BPRC effort [Fees shall be dedicated to a line item in the budget for the Property Maintenance Division's enforcement and administration of the Vacant Property Registration requirements]. Ms. Kelleher explained that the fees are scaled; increasing with each year a property remains vacant. She stated that the legislation was recently reviewed by the Legislative Aide Committee, who made

some suggestions that tighten the legislation. The largest change removed the ability of a property owner to use electronic and flyer advertisement to obtain a waiver.

Mr. Khokhar stated that in other states vacant properties are charged higher property tax rates.

Ms. Kelleher stated that Codes has adopted a tougher "no nonsense" approach. The BPRC expressed their support.

Target List Properties

Mr. Khokhar distributed copies of letters drafted and sent to 628 and 644 North Front Street, properties that were added at the December meeting. Updates on the existing properties were not presented. It was noted that 620 North Front was excluded due to the potential for litigation.

When discussing the Blighted Property process, Mr. Olsen suggested using a matrix to track the process each target property takes. It was noted that the Codes enforcement process will mirror the Blighted Property process. Mr. Khokhar questioned if this matrix would be redundant. Ms. Kelleher noted that the matrix could contain pertinent information and highlight the course each property takes.

Mr. Olsen requested that Ms. Kelleher prepare the matrix in the form of a spreadsheet.

Mr. Khokhar stated that 22 properties are on the Blighted Property list.

Ms. Mayfield noted the need for a popup notice to be added in the city's Hansen data base so staff can easily identify properties that are in the process.

Other Business

Ms. Kelleher announced that she and Mr. Olsen were invited to speak about the BPRC at the Industrial and Commercial Development Committee meeting, a part of the Reading Berks Association of Realtors.

Mr. Olsen noted his agreement to facilitate the Reading Beautification (RBI) planning session last Saturday at the Goggleworks. The RBI is a not for profit organization that was formed in the mid 70's. He said that the group discussed the past and future of the organization. He stated that the RBI group discussed

broadening their scope to include surrounding communities but decided that as the issues in Reading are unfinished, it is not time to take on the issues in other areas. He stated that the RBI budget year ends June 30th of each year.

Mr. Olsen noted meeting Al Huff at the planning session. Mr. Huff explained his work to identify rental properties and assess neighborhoods. He stated that he was amazed at the work Mr. Huff and his colleagues have performed. He noted the wealth of information collected by this group. He noted Mr. Huff's involvement with RiverPlace.

Ms. Wolfe suggested honoring the work of Mr. Huff's group. Mr. Olsen offered to discuss this further with Mr. Behling and the RiverPlace board.

Ms. Kelleher stated that Mr. Huff sent his property information to the Council Office electronically. She stated that when first receiving the information, she did a sampling and found 5 new illegal rentals in the 200 block of Linden Street. She explained that the Council Office has identified over 5,000 illegal rentals that are not currently in the Codes database and the staff intern is currently working to re-sort the information and compare it against the data collected by the office to find new properties.

Mr. Olsen stated that the Office of Neighborhood Development's (OND) mission was also discussed at the meeting. Mr. Khokhar stated that the Focus of OND seemed to improve sections of the city.

Mr. Bealer noted the need to identify good properties in blocks where out of town property owners are chipping away at the quality of life of the neighborhood. He suggested keeping these areas in mind when the BPRC selects its next neighborhood and area.

Mr. Bealer noted the good attendance and the Reading Police participation at the Community Hope meeting. The group expressed their hope that additional off-street parking can be provided when problem properties are demolished. Ms. Kelleher explained that Mr. Pick, County Community Development Director, can assist by using the ADD (Acquisition, Demolition, and Disposition) program to assist in this effort. She explained the ADD program.

Mr. Bealer stated that the BPRC will need to begin appraisals of the target properties who do not comply near the end of 2009. Ms. Kelleher stated that CD staff will begin working to find uncommitted CDBG funds in early February.

She promised to have a conversation with Mr. Hottenstein about redirecting some of these funds to cover these costs.

Mr. Olsen noted his discussions with Ms. Kelleher about the creation of subcommittees to assist the efforts of the BPRC. Ms. Kelleher and Mr. Olsen recommend establishing four committees: Codes, Funding, Education and Legislative or Research. The topic will be further discussed at the February meeting.

Mr. Bealer stated that he has asked Dr. Chapman, Superintendent of the Reading School District, to meet with the Director of Properties of Merit (POM). Ms. Kelleher stated that perhaps POM could organize a project with the students, noting the need for schools receiving 21st Century funding to undertake community projects.

Ms. Wolfe moved, seconded by Mr. Candelario, to adjourn the meeting.

Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher CMC, City Clerk

Follow-up Issues:

- Update map to include OCR, ADD, Community Gardens, etc – W. Bealer
- Grants – L. Olsen & L. Kelleher
- Update on 22 target properties – W. Bealer & J. Khokhar
- Addition of Hansen pop-up identifying properties in the Blighted Property process – M. Mayfield
- Creation of sub-committees – L. Olsen & L. Kelleher
- Matrix sheets for properties in the process – L. Kelleher
- Properties of Merit Presentation (February Meeting)